

Nov/Dec 2006

# Spirituality & Health

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## 37 Practices to Enrich Your Life

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# THE ALPHABET IN ACTION



*From churches  
to prisons,  
groups are  
making these  
practices the  
underpinnings  
of their  
spiritual lives.*

BY MARY ANN BRUSSAT



**L**et's review some ways we can enrich our spiritual lives," says Rev. Arlene Butler. "A is for Attention. B is for Beauty and Being Present. C is for Compassion and Connections." For the 60 seniors chanting with her, this is a standard element of their weekly interfaith service at the King Bruwaert House retirement community in Burr Ridge, Illinois.

"We recite the Alphabet of Spiritual Literacy and then I preach on one of the practices," Butler

tells me. She's been doing this for seven years. "My congregation has come to see these practices as the underpinnings of their spiritual lives."

I flash back to the living room of our loft 10 years ago. Frederic is reading me passages he thinks should go in our book *Spiritual Literacy* to demonstrate how to see everyday life from a spiritual perspective. And I'm not always getting it. "Yes," I say, "that passage is beautifully written and I like the thought, but why again is that 'spiritual'?" "Because it's about 'wonder' or 'gratitude' or 'devotion' or 'transformation'," explains Fred patiently. I write down these words until eventually we have 37 of them, and we realize that they are markers of the spiritual life in all the world's religious and spiritual traditions.

That list (see page 42), put together over several Sunday afternoons, has since become an integral part of our work. We defined and developed it in two books and now use it to categorize our book and film reviews and to organize our website. Now, to our delight, we're learning that people are not only reciting it in church, they are using it to catalyze spiritual practices in women's circles, hospitals, retirement communities, businesses, and prisons.

### It's All in the Practice

"I'm not very interested in how you define compassion if you don't show compassion for me," says Chaplain Stephen Hall, director of religious services and community involvement for the Indiana state prison system.

Hall has invited me to visit some prisons where the latest incarnation of the Alphabet of Spiritual Literacy — a 26-part DVD series originally produced for Canadian television — is included in the curriculum for Indiana's Purposeful Living Units Serve (PLUS). In this voluntary program, prisoners apply to live in special units within the facilities and then spend 16 months working on spiritual, moral, and character development as well as life-skills training. These programs are currently in nine facilities with plans for more soon. Hall chose our video alphabet for the PLUS faith track because it is explicitly multifaith. Each half-hour DVD episode uses 12 to 16 short "aha!" passages from various spiritual traditions to illustrate one quality in the alphabet.

When we arrive at the Correctional Industrial Facility near Indianapolis, about 80 of the 236 men in the PLUS program are gathered in the chapel watching the *Spiritual Literacy* DVD on Reverence. "What one word does rev-

erence make you think of?" asks corrections officer Tim Horan. "Respect." "Tolerance." "Holiness." "God." Horan crisscrosses the room calling on the men at random. "What did you like? What part spoke to you?"

Quite a few are taken with a passage in which naturalist Terry Tempest Williams describes stopping to clean up a dead swan she finds on the beach. "I liked it that she used her spit to polish its beak. Taking time with it — that shows reverence," says one man.

Every week PLUS participants in this facility make a practice plan, stating a long-range life goal and a short-range, measurable goal for the week. In the common room of the PLUS living unit, Bill, a tall, middle-aged man with an earnest intensity, shows me his folder of plans. "There is nothing more challenging than forgiveness because it challenges me to better myself," he reads from one report. "I have to bring myself up to another level if I am going to forgive you, if I really believe that you've harmed me."

How has he actually practiced forgiveness, I ask. He responds by taking me through

the steps. "People are very candid with their feelings in here, and I can react to someone's look or comment or aside. I had to start within myself by not letting those things affect me." So first he forgave himself for accepting what would hurt him. Then he recognized that the other man was like him and prone to error, and he released any resentment he felt toward him.

**First you forgive yourself.  
Then you recognize that  
another is like you and  
prone to error. Then you  
release your resentment.**

### Dealing with Chaos

At the Wabash Valley Correctional Facility, PLUS participants lead the discussions for eleven Spiritual Literacy classes, each with eight men. The class meeting the day I visit includes several Christians, a couple of Buddhists, a Native American, and a Taoist.

The television is in a corner of the noisy common area where several classes are going on simultaneously, and the Spiritual Literacy guys have turned on the DVD's closed captions to make it easier to hear the episode on Justness. As they watch, they copy down quotes on work sheets, and in the discussion later they call out their favorites:

*continued on page 80*

OPPOSITE PAGE; CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: STEVE SKJOLD/ALAMY; THINKSTOCK/ALAMY; PETE SALOUTOS/CORBIS



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Miles, Begins With A Single  
Step..." Lao Tsu*

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## Alphabet in Action

*continued from page 49*

"Solzhenitsyn said, 'The line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.'" "The guy in the Parker Palmer story who says, 'I have never asked myself if I was being effective, but only if I was being faithful.'" "The story of the woman who got all those petitions for peace because children are being killed in war." "The woman who apologized to the kid on the skateboard — except that kid should have apologized too." I'm amazed they've picked up so much from one viewing.

One scene is mentioned several times, and the men analyze it. As the screen shows a psychedelic seascape, we hear the story of the time when Jesus and the disciples were in a small boat at sea and a bad storm came up. When the boat begins to rock, the disciples panic and wake Jesus, who calms the storm by projecting his own peacefulness upon it. "We can control our situation," observes one man. "When we are surrounded by chaos, we can either let that inside us, like the disciples did, or we can take the peace inside us and bring it to the outside."

### We Are All Connected

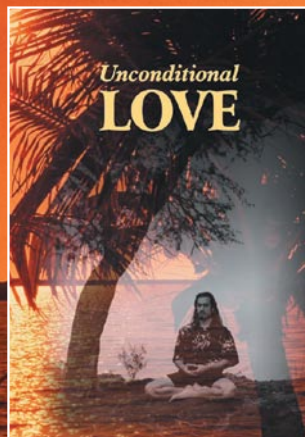
On the way to the chapel at the Indiana Women's Prison in Indianapolis, Chaplain Hall and I pass some tents and picnic tables. "They just had family week here," Hall explains, "when the women's children and grandchildren come for extended visits and activities."

The PLUS unit consists of just 25 women, and most of them are gathered to see the DVD on Love. As we watch it together, I find myself acutely aware that these women are separated from their loved ones. How will they respond to such poignant images about marriage and parenthood?

After a few minutes of quiet reflection, the women begin to share, and they

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sound like every other women's group I've ever been in! There's the usual mix of laughter, memories, personal storytelling, and passing of the box of tissues.

After class, Linda, a grandmother who's been at the prison for 17 years, tells me that she's found joy in being able to see God in everything. A Roman Catholic, she has a solid repertoire of spiritual practices, including daily journaling, devotional reading, and prayer. "What," I ask, "if anything, is different now?" She struggles to find the words. "*Spiritual Literacy* has increased the effort in my prayer. When you have a new appreciation for things, and you see things in a new light, you can concentrate and be more fully present in it. I am more fully present in prayer and in my relationships."

Kim approaches to talk about popular movies, so I'm not surprised when she mentions the impact of having spiritual practices presented through an audio and visual experience. "You heard in the discussion people saying, 'That reminds me of this time and that experience.' That's possible because of how film affects you.

"There was a time when I was very happy," she continues. "I had a job; I was very connected spiritually; my family life was in harmony; my life was going well. Then I got away from that and ended up here. Watching this alphabet has enabled me to plug back into that earlier place. It gets me to a level of spirituality where I can see the beauty of everything, even in what we would call suffering. It has reinforced what I truly believe: We are all connected, and we are not alone."

Looking around the chapel, smiling at the women who have greeted and hugged me, recalling all the sharing I've heard over the last few days, I realize — it's done that for me, too. ❖

Mary Ann Brussat and her husband, Frederic, are the media editors of *Spirituality & Health* and authors of the bestselling books *Spiritual Literacy* and *Spiritual Rx*.

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